Constructing an “Evolving Yinni Guiqiao Identity”: A Case Study of the Yinni Guiqiao in Beijing
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Abstract

This study focuses on the people known as Yinni Guiqiao in Chinese. Yinni is the Chinese translation of Indonesia, and Guiqiao refer to those who are born and have been living outside of China but who migrate to their ancestors’ country of origin – a migration interpreted by Chinese government as ‘coming home’, hence the word gui. Specifically, the term Yinni Guiqiao (印尼歸僑) refers to those who were born or lived in Indonesia, migrated to the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s and 1960s, and now have all become Chinese citizens after almost 50 years living in China. As transnational migrants, the Yinni Guiqiao provide a unique opportunity to examine how an “evolving Yinni Guiqiao identity” is constructed and reconstructed. This study explores in particular the following questions:

First, while ethnic differentiation is an important labeling process for migrants as minorities in foreign countries, is it important for Yinni Guiqiao after they move to their ancestors’ country of origin?

Second, is Yinni Guiqiao another sub-ethnic category in China that is similar to or different from other existing sub-ethnic categories within Han majority to which the Yinni Guiqiao supposedly belong?

Third, in what ways is their distinctive ethnic identity constructed and reconstructed
through the politics of contemporary China by various forces, leading to situations of political control, ideological manipulation and cultural alienation?

Fourth, what are the major features of this new sub-ethnicity? And what implications does this study have for understanding ethnicity in general and identity formations of diasporic Chinese in particular?

This study is interdisciplinary in nature. It employs, in particular, Barth’s boundary theory and related propositions to explore the ethnicity configuration of a particular historical group of Chinese migrants. It finds that the construction process of *Yinni Guiqiao* identity starts with the migration process of *Yinni Guiqiao* to China. It is a continuum of both graded differentiation, from individual to collective levels, and increased levels of ethnic identity, from minimal identity to maximal ethnicity. The core part of the construction lies in layered dialectical syntheses resulting from interactions between different sets of internal and external factors. Two factors, “ethnic broker” and “ethnic symbol”, play significant roles in the construction of *Yinni Guiqiao* identity. Thus *Yinni Guiqiao* identity is not a fixed entity. It is subject to transformation and re-construction.

A number of noticeable features are found in the *Yinni Guiqiao* identity. The first and the most salient one is the role of political power in the construction of ethnic identity, the second is the transnational nature of this identity, the third one is its cultural hybridity, and the last feature is the transferability of this identity. The evolving sub-ethnic identity of supposedly ‘returning’ migrants to their ancestors’ country of origin, the mechanism of identity formation and the features of this identity revealed by this study supplement the literature on diasporic Chinese in particular and contribute to a better understanding of transnational migrants in general.
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